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Congress is asked for aid to 'contras'

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WASHINGTON — The Reagan administration yesterday reopened its campaign for congressional approval of funds for the "contras" fighting the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua, with a key official warning that continued refusal to back the guerrillas would be "a serious mistake."

"I can't guarantee you success, but if you allow the anti-Sandinistas to falter, I think you can guarantee failure for our interests, failure for democracy, failure for negotiations, and failure for peace," said Langhorne A. Motley, assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs.

Mr. Motley's appearance before the House Western Hemispheric Affairs subcommittee was the first exchange in what is likely to be an intense, and perhaps bitter, foreign-policy debate in the opening weeks of the new Congress over how to confront the Sandinistas. Congress must decide whether to lift or extend its ban on funds for the Contras when it expires in March.

Representative Michael D. Barnes, the Maryland Democrat who chairs the panel and has been a constant critic of administration policy in Nicaragua, said previous pressure on the Sandinistas, including the mining of Nicaraguan harbors, had failed to promote U.S. interests or make the leaders in Managua more conciliatory.

"It may make some of us feel good to mine harbors, blow up bridges, and do whatever we have done. It may make some people feel good, I don't know. But it makes a lot of people not feel good to engage in this type of activity," said Mr. Barnes.

Opening the first session this term, he signaled both continuing opposition to major elements of U.S. regional policy and a willingness to debate controversial issues. He said he found policy toward Nicaragua "particularly disturbing," although he remained "open-minded" on ways of protecting U.S. interests without resorting to "secret wars."

Mr. Motley sidestepped a question from Mr. Barnes on what alter-

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MICHAEL D. BARNES

native policies to supporting covert war the administration had formulated for Nicaragua. Instead, he recalled that a year ago there was considerable skepticism on Capitol Hill about increased aid for El Salvador, and said there were "striking similarities" between that debate and the controversy over funding for the contras. Congress, he noted, had eventually approved the aid for El Salvador.

"Today there is a new debate, and a new decision [to be made]. The doomsdayers say Congress will walk away from the problem, but I don't accept that judgment. . . . I may be naive, but I am not prepared to accept that we cannot figure out some way to work these things out. . . . I look forward to more sessions" with the committee, said Mr. Motley.

"I am sure we will have them," said Mr. Barnes.

Mr. Motley argued that it was U.S. support for the contras that persuaded the Sandinistas that they had "something to bargain for."

"Nobody bargains for something he expects to get free," he said. "If the Nicaraguans in the armed resistance are abandoned, why should the Sandinistas negotiate with them?"

Three expert witnesses — William D. Rogers, assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs in the Ford administration, Abraham F. Lowenthal, professor of international relations at the University of Southern California, and Norman A. Bailey, a former National Security Council staffer — agreed that coercion was a legitimate diplomatic tool but asserted that in Nicaragua it was now likely to be counterproductive. They argued for more diplomatic and economic initiatives in the region from the U.S.

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